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The Power of Protest Music: A Concept Album

Matthew Patterson

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Matthew Patterson

Dr. Anne Flaherty and Dr. Laura Pruett

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The Power of Protest Music: A Concept Album

Introduction:

This semester, I decided to create an honors contract for one of my favorite classes offered at Merrimack, Music and Politics. Both music and politics are two of my biggest interests, so I felt that this class would allow me to create a very unique final project. For my project, I decided to create my own political concept album that would analyze the role of music in certain social and political movements. Inspired by old vinyl records, this curation will contain 12 songs that are divided evenly on each side of the record. Side A will contain six songs that are considered anthems of the Civil Rights Movement, while Side B will contain six songs that are considered anthems for the Black Lives Matter Movement. The tracklist will be based on the release date of each song, beginning with the oldest songs and ending with the newest songs, to show how protest music has evolved throughout modern history.

After curating the album, I will analyze each song, looking at both the political and musical elements of the song. In general, each song's analysis will be broken into three separate paragraphs, each dealing with a different topic. The first paragraph will deal with the song's political message. Here, I will look at the lyrics and analyze what about them makes the song political. If necessary, I will look at the song's context, discovering what historical events inspired the creation of the song. In the next paragraph, I will analyze the song's musical

elements. Looking at elements like dynamics, rhythm, melody, harmony, instrumentation, and vocals, I will learn how the musical elements contribute to the political nature of the song.

Finally, the last paragraph will connect to the honors program's pedagogical goal of a transformative experience, allowing me to reflect on my personal thoughts about each historically significant song. I will reflect on the song's message, music, or anything else that resonates with me. After completing this project, I will have analyzed and reflected on 12 political songs, allowing me to gain a deeper understanding about the power of protest music.

Tracklist:

Side A: Songs of the Civil Rights Movement:

1. Strange Fruit - Billie Holiday
2. This Little Light of Mine - The Freedom Singers
3. Alabama - John Coltrane
4. The Times They Are A-Changin' - Bob Dylan
5. People Get Ready - The Impressions
6. To Be Young, Gifted, and Black - Nina Simone

Side B: Songs of the Black Lives Matter Movement:

7. Black Rage - Lauryn Hill
8. Be Free - J. Cole
9. Glory - Common & John Legend
10. Hell You Talmbout - Janelle Monaé & Wondaland Records
11. Freedom - Beyoncé ft. Kendrick Lamar
12. XXX. - Kendrick Lamar ft. U2

Side A

Songs of the Civil Rights Movement



Track 1: “Strange Fruit” - Billie Holiday (1939)

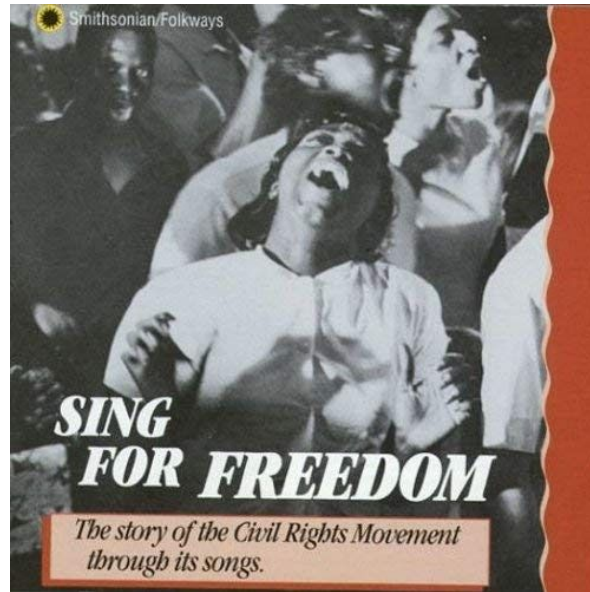
The first song in my concept album is “Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday. In this song, Holiday sings about the lynching of black people in the south during the Jim Crow era, comparing their dead bodies to “strange fruit” hanging on trees. Holiday creates a horrifying picture of these lynchings through the lyrics. Holiday begins by vividly describing the faces of the dead bodies hanging off of the trees. In the song, Holiday sings about a face that possesses “bulging eyes” and a “twisted mouth.” This gruesome image is likely to become ingrained into the listener’s mind, acting as a reminder of how the evils of racism have destroyed the lives of black people throughout U.S history. Holiday continues by singing about how the lynched bodies rot on the tree like old fruit. In the song, Holiday sings of a “Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh, Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.” This lyric creates another unforgettable image of the

lynchings that occurred in the Jim Crow era. These dead bodies were not cleaned and laid peacefully to rest, rather they were left to rot like pieces of fruit. Holiday closes the song with a clear picture that illustrates how closely the dead bodies resemble pieces of rotting, old fruit. Holiday sings “Here is fruit for the crows to pluck, For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck, For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop, Here is a strange and bitter crop.” This lyric shows that the dead bodies were cruelly left behind after being lynched for crows to eat. This utter lack of respect for the dead bodies shows just how dehumanizing and inhumane the practice of lynching is. “Strange Fruit” is a political song because it depicts a clear image of the vile way black people were lynched during the Jim Crow era. This song is a constant reminder of the hateful history of racism that has plagued the United States for centuries, making it one of the most haunting anthems of the Civil Rights Movement.

The musical elements of “Strange Fruit” serve to highlight the lyrical content of the song, creating a dark and ominous sound to match the haunting lyrics. The song’s instrumentation features only a piano and trumpet as accompaniment to Holiday’s vocals. This creates a simple yet dark arrangement that serves to highlight the dark themes of racism and lynching found in the lyrics. The melody of the song is conjunct, as the melody contains notes that have similar pitches. In a song that is very lyric driven, a conjunct melody is necessary as it won’t distract the listener from the message of the lyrics. The rhythm of “Strange Fruit” is very slow, making the song a dark ballad. This slow rhythm ultimately makes the song more dramatic, allowing the sound of the song to match the drama found in the lyrics. Lastly, the song’s form consists only of verses, featuring no choruses or bridges. The lack of a chorus proves that the song is not meant to be catchy, rather, the message and power behind the lyrics is what Holiday wants the listener to

remember about the song. The simple instrumentation, conjunct melody, slow rhythm, and strictly verse form create a slow, haunting sound for “Strange Fruit,” ultimately allowing the political message found in the lyrics to shine.

I found “Strange Fruit” to be a very dark, yet very powerful song in both sound and lyrical content. I was taken aback by the song’s dramatic, almost theatrical quality, making the song and its message memorable and one of my favorite songs that I included in this album. The lyrics created a devastatingly vivid picture of a lynching in my head, ultimately succeeding in its goal to remind the listener of the horrors of lynching. Additionally, I listen to all types of music, including jazz. Despite this, I have never heard of this song before working on this project. Upon listening to it, I loved the song’s emotional, jazzy elements and thoroughly enjoyed covering this song. The emotion and power of the the song really moved me and taught me more about the horrible history of lynching here in the United States. “Strange Fruit” has a dark and moving nature and is one of the most famous protest songs of all time, making it the perfect song to start with for my concept album.



Track 2: “This Little Light Of Mine” - The Freedom Singers (1963)

Track #2 in my album is “This Little Light of Mine,” performed by The Freedom Singers. In this song, The Freedom Singers seek to uplift and empower black Americans suffering from the racism of the Civil Rights era. The lyric “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine” is repeated often in the song, especially in the beginning. This lyric inspires black people to love and be proud of who they are, despite all of the hate and racism directed at them constantly. Despite all of the evil they face, this song encourages black people to live their lives and essentially let their light shine through the racist attacks. The song continues, listing places where the Freedom Singers will let their light shine through. Lyrics like “Everywhere I go Lord, I’m gonna let it shine” and “All along the highway, I’m gonna let it shine” encourage black people to proudly be themselves and live without fear everywhere they go. Prior to and through the Civil Rights Movement, this message of love and pride was especially important, with Jim Crow laws in place and the KKK spreading hate. “This Little Light of Mine” became a political song because it uplifted the spirits of African Americans at a time when they were faced with

immense discrimination and hate, making this song an empowering anthem in the Civil Rights Movement.

The musical elements of “This Little Light of Mine” create a fun, powerful, and participatory sound, making the sound just as empowering and uplifting as the lyrics. The dynamics of the song are very loud throughout, as the singers all have very powerful voices accompanied by booming claps. This loud dynamic creates a defiant quality in the song and a sense of pride for the listeners, resulting in an empowering sound for the song. The rhythm of the song is quick paced, with a fast tempo. The tempo is not too fast that it makes the song overwhelming or unsingable, however, it is fast enough to contribute to the sound’s fun and empowering nature. The song features no instruments, rather it just features vocals and clapping. The vocals sound like loud chants, while the clapping is fun and inviting. The chants and claps give the song a participatory nature, which is necessary for getting the listener involved and connected with the message. With the listener participating and connecting with the song’s message, the listener begins to feel empowered. Lastly, the song does not have a structured form. The song does not have a true chorus, however, the lyric “I’m gonna let it shine” is a key part of the song. This lyric is the most empowering lyric in the song, and it is repeated very often, contributing to the empowering nature of the song. The powerful and loud dynamic, fast tempo, participatory nature, and repetition of an inspiring phrase create an empowering and uplifting sound for “This Little Light of Mine,” ultimately making the sound of the song as empowering as the lyrics.

As I reflect on “This Little Light of Mine,” performed by The Freedom Singers, I immediately think of the song’s empowering nature. The song is very fun, and I found it

impossible to not feel happy after listening to it. In fact, I found myself humming it for the whole day after I listened to it! The song instantly uplifted me, making it an effective anthem for empowering people. Additionally, I enjoyed hearing such a historical group sing this song. Previously, I had heard in class of the Freedom Singers due to their association with Pete Seeger. They were a student-formed group that performed at many key events during the Civil Rights Movement. Though I had heard of them, I have never heard them sing before. Hearing them while doing this project was fascinating as they are so closely tied with such a historical time period. The Freedom Singers' version of "This Little Light of Mine" is historically significant and extremely empowering, making it a necessary addition to my concept album.



Track 3: “Alabama” - John Coltrane (1963)

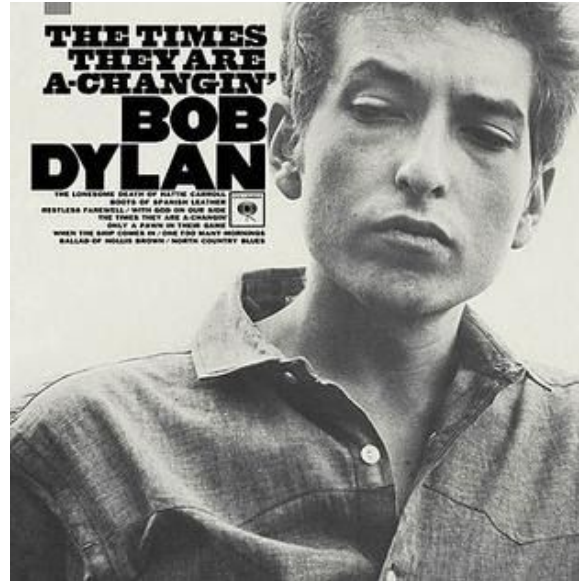
The next song in my curation is “Alabama” by John Coltrane. This song is unique as it is the only song in my curation without lyrics. Despite this, the composition has a heavy political message, as it is an expression of sadness and anger due to the Birmingham Church Bombing. As there are no lyrics, this paragraph will provide background on the bombing and its connection to “Alabama.” Birmingham, Alabama was one of the most racially discriminatory and segregated cities in America in the 1960s. Led by opposer of desegregation, Governor George Wallace, and featuring a violent sect of the KKK, Birmingham was a city filled with white supremacy (History.com Editors, 2010). In Birmingham was the 16th Street Birmingham Church, a church for prayer and a spot where several Civil Rights leaders met and held protests. On September 15, 1963, 200 church members were in the church when the church was bombed by the KKK, killing 4 young girls and injuring more than 20 others (History.com Editors, 2010). This horrible attack had an immediate impact on the Civil Rights Movement, sparking outrage that resulted in a lot of support calling for the end of segregation. Months later, John Coltrane recorded “Alabama,” a

prayer-like piece played on the saxophone. The composition acted as an outpouring of sadness and outrage over the incident. “Alabama” essentially marks a time in the Civil Rights Movement when “black forbearance gave in to anger (Davis, 2001).” “Alabama” is a political song because it is an honest reflection on the fury and sorrow brought on by the Birmingham Church Bombing, reminding the listener of the racist evils committed during the Civil Rights Era.

The musical elements of “Alabama” serve to create a somber and emotional sound, reflecting the sadness and anger felt as a result of the Birmingham Church Bombing. The instrumentation of the song consists of a saxophone, drums, a cello, and a piano. Due to the absence of lyrics or vocals, the saxophone acts as the lead melody in this song, with the other instruments acting as accompaniment. In this piece, the saxophone essentially sounds like it's crying, with a low, dreary sound. This cry contributes to the sadness and anger reflected in the piece. The harmony of this song is consonant. Though each of the instruments have a distinct sound, they complement each other rather than clash against each other. Each instrument plays a role in crafting the emotions of the song, with the saxophone and cello sounding sad and the piano and drums sounding angry. Ultimately, the instruments unite to create a somber, despairing sound. The song is performed with a minor scale, meaning the instruments make lower, sadder notes rather than the higher, happier notes of the major scale. This gives the song a mournful feel that reflects the sadness and anger felt after the Birmingham Church Bombing. Lastly, the dynamics of the song start off soft, creating a sad sound, like a cry. As the song continues, the middle section gets louder and features more instruments, sounding bluesy and angrier. The piece builds up and gets its loudest dynamic during the last 45 seconds, acting as a moment of emotional catharsis after a long and dreary performance. The cry of the saxophone, consonant

harmony, minor scale, and increasingly loud dynamic of “Alabama” create a sound of fury and sorrow, reflecting the anger and sadness felt in Birmingham after the bombing.

As I reflect on “Alabama,” I first think about how it is the only song in my curation that only features instruments. With no lyrics, I found the song hard to work with during this project. I had to focus entirely on the music of the song rather than vocals to find out what the political message of the song was. This was an unfamiliar yet rewarding task, as I am now able to fully grasp the power and emotion of the song. Having to carefully study the instrumentation and do research on the song’s background gave me a perspective on how it felt to live through the Birmingham Church Bombing, giving me a deeper understanding about the tragedy. Additionally, when reflecting on this song, I realized that I don’t ever listen to music without vocals. I never hear pieces like this in my daily life, so doing this project gave me a greater appreciation for compositions composed of only instruments. “Alabama” clearly reflects the pain felt after the Birmingham Church Bombing, making it one of the most significant pieces created during the Civil Rights Movement.



Track 4: “The Times They Are A-Changin’” - Bob Dylan (1964)

The next song in my concept album is “The Times They Are A-Changin’” by Bob Dylan. In this song, Dylan creates an anthem calling for change, warning anyone who opposes such changes that times are changing. The song’s message calls for change in general and does not sing about one certain movement. The lyric “The times they are a-changin’” illustrates this, as it is a very meaningful, yet broad line. Repeated at the end of each verse, this lyric allows the song to relate to many different movements that desire to see change. The Civil Rights Movement adopted this song into the movement, declaring that the times of segregation and discrimination are changing into times of equality and justice. The lyrics’ broad nature allows the song to be an anthem, not for a specific movement, but for change in general. The song contains many lyrics that warn people against trying to stop change and progress from happening. Dylan calls out our government officials, singing “Come senators, congressmen, please heed the call, Don’t stand in the doorway, don’t block up the hall, For he that gets hurt will be he who has stalled” and stubborn parents, singing “Come mothers and fathers throughout the land, And don’t criticize

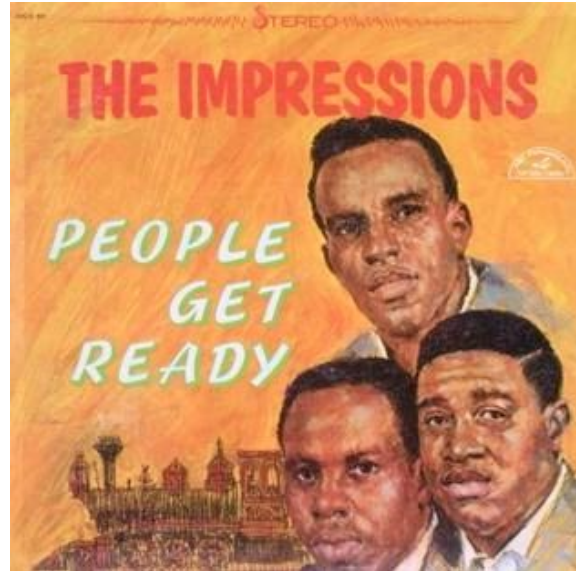
what you can't understand, Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command, Your old road is rapidly aging." In these lyrics, Dylan asks the government to not impede change from happening, and he asks parents to not criticize their children for fighting for change, because their older worldviews are falling out of style. These lyrics show Dylan asking those hesitant about change to not stand in the way of others, proving that this song is a revolutionary anthem that uplifts the idea of change. In the song, Dylan warns everyone that change is unstoppable, whether they want it to come or not. With the lyric "Admit that the waters around you have grown, And accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone, If your time to you is worth saving, Then you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone, For the times they are a-changin'," Dylan compare the changing times to growing waters, and warns people that if they don't change with the times, they'll drown. This lyric highlights the power of change and the strength that a movement can have. "The Times They Are A-Changin'" is a political song because it acts as an anthem calling for change, and when associated with the Civil Rights Movement, it calls for an end to segregation and racism, making it one of the most revolutionary anthems during the era.

The musical elements of "The Times They Are A-Changin'" serve to create a simple sound in the song that allows the song's lyrical content to shine through. The instrumentation of this song features just an acoustic guitar with the occasional appearance of a harmonica. This sparse arrangement of just vocals and guitar gives the song a very simple sound, allowing it to become very lyric driven, ultimately making the focus of the song the message of change. The texture of this song features just Dylan's vocals leading the melody while the guitar acts as accompaniment. This combination means that the song is a homophony. The homophonic sound

contributes to the song's simple nature, emphasizing the message of change in the song. The dynamics of the song are soft consistently throughout the entire song. This unchanging, soft dynamic develops the simplicity of the song that helps showcase the lyrical message. Lastly, the form of this song consists of strictly verses. However, at the end of each verse, the phrase "The times they are a-changin'" is sung, acting as the song's hook. With the repetition of this line, the idea of changing times is highlighted and becomes ingrained into the listener's head, ultimately showcasing the message of the song. The sparse instrumentation, homophonic texture, soft dynamic, and repetition of a key hook create a simple, yet powerful sound for "The Times They Are A-Changin'," illuminating the song's revolutionary message and turning the song into an anthem of change.

When I listened to the message behind "The Times They Are A-Changin'," the song reminded me of a unit we covered in class on campaign music. Earlier in the semester, we read an article which examined the messages displayed in each Democratic Presidential nominee's campaign playlists. Bernie Sanders' playlist involved plenty of songs that displayed messages of revolution and change, as his campaign sought to bring about drastic change in our society and politics (Herndon, 2019). Because of this song's theme of changing times, I couldn't help but think of how perfect "The Times They Are A-Changin'" would have fit in his playlist! Additionally, I found the message of "The Times They Are A-Changin'" to still be as relevant today as it was back in the 60s. Today, I believe we still need change in our political system and more equality for minority groups. The song's lyrics are very timeless and still very necessary. "The Times They Are A-Changin'" is a very simple song with a broad message that sings of

changing times, ultimately making this song an anthem for change, especially during the Civil Rights Movement.



Track 5: “People Get Ready” - The Impressions (1965)

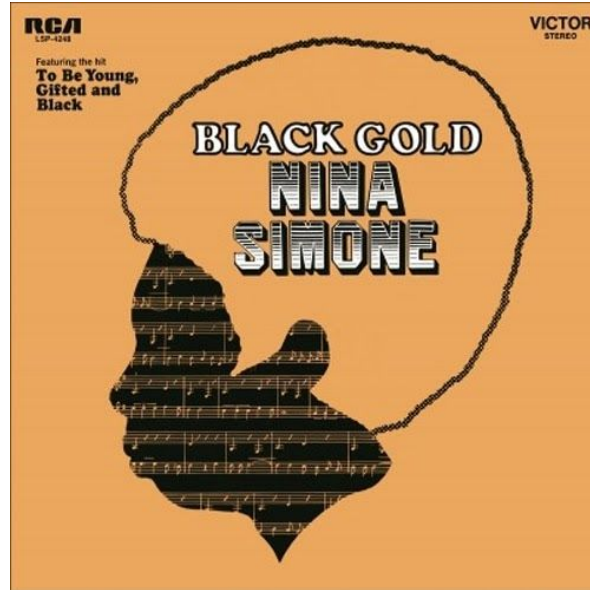
Track #5 in my concept album is “People Get Ready” by The Impressions. In the song, The Impressions seek to give hope to black people facing discrimination in the 1960s, singing that God will bring about change and deliverance. In the song’s chorus, The Impressions compare change to a moving train, singing “People get ready, there's a train a-comin', You don't need no baggage, you just get on board.” In this lyric, the phrase “train a-comin'” alludes to a coming change in society that will bring about equality. This idea of coming change brings hope of better, more equitable days coming in the future to black people surrounded by racism. The chorus continues by connecting this coming social change to God, singing “All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin', Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.” In this lyric, the listener is told that all they need to do to receive this change is have faith in the Lord and praise him. By reassuring black listeners that God will save them from the discrimination of the 1960s, the song strengthens the listener’s faith in God, ultimately giving them hope that one day justice will come. The song reiterates this idea of faith in God bringing about change through the lyric

“Faith is the key, open the doors and board 'em, There's hope for all among those loved the most.” With change again being compared to a train, this lyric states that faith is the key to opening the doors of the train, meaning that faith will allow one to receive and embrace change. The “There's hope for all among those loved the most” lyric emphasizes the idea that all those who are loved by God should have hope, meaning anyone who has faith in God has reason to be hopeful for better days. “People Get Ready” is a political song because it brings hope to black people who have been discriminated against, highlighting the idea that faith in God will bring them change and deliverance. This special message of hope makes the song a source of inspiration during the Civil Rights Movement.

The musical elements of “People Get Ready” create a peaceful, heavenly sound for the song, reiterating the idea that faith in God will bring about change. The instruments of the song feature guitar, keyboard, drums, and even a bongo-sounding drum. This instrumentation gives the song an older, soulful, and more classic feel, making the song very easy to listen to. This easy-going sound reflects the peaceful message of the song, which states that faith in God will bring about change. The dynamics of the song are very soft throughout the entire piece. This soft dynamic makes the song very pleasant and soothing. This delicate nature of the song matches with the peaceful message of the song. Ultimately, this dynamic soothes the listener’s anger regarding the injustices they face and allows them to focus on the hopeful message portrayed in the song. The rhythm of the song is very slow-paced. The song’s slow pace makes the song sound like a lullaby. This lullaby-like nature further enhances the peaceful sound of the song, again quelling feelings of anger and emphasizing the hopeful idea of faith bringing deliverance. Lastly, the song’s harmony is consonant. The sounds in this song are all harmonious,

complementing each other rather than clashing against each other. This harmonious sound gives the song a heavenly nature, reflecting the idea of faith in God bringing on change. The soulful instrumentation, soft dynamic, slow rhythm, and consonant harmony give “People Get Ready” a peaceful, heavenly sound that ultimately reflects the message of hope and faith found in the song.

The aspect I loved most about “People Get Ready” is the soothing nature of the song. Right now, the world is obviously very crazy and scary due to the Coronavirus pandemic, and everyone is very stressed. Luckily, we have songs like this to help us cope with the stress. This song acts as a nice escape from our harsh reality, soothing our fear and anxiety. Because of this, I find “People Get Ready” to be very therapeutic. Additionally, I really loved the instrumentation of the song. The song features a bongo, which is a sound I hadn’t heard in any of the songs in my album before, giving the song a unique sound. I had fun analyzing this song and trying to spot which instruments were being played. “People Get Ready” is a very peaceful and soothing song with a message proclaiming that faith in God will result in deliverance for black people living through racism during the Civil Rights era, making it an inspirational anthem of the Civil Rights Movement.



Track 6: “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” - Nina Simone (1969)

The last song on Side A of my concept album is “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” by Nina Simone. In this song, Simone empowers black people to be proud of the fact that they are black, despite the racism that they face. Simone sings of how black children must be uplifted and told that they can achieve anything they want, singing “We must begin to tell our young, There's a world waiting for you, Yours is a quest that's just begun.” Due to the racism and discrimination occurring for centuries before the Civil Rights Movement, many black children were discouraged and had their dreams diminished before they even grew up. To combat this issue, Simone urges listeners to uplift black children and encourage them to follow their dreams. This encouraging lyric empowers black children to be proud that they are black. The song’s uplifting spirit is further developed through the lyric “When you're feeling really low, Yeah, there's a great truth that you should know, When you're young, gifted and black, Your soul's intact.” Here, Simone reminds black listeners that whenever they are being discriminated against or just feel sad in general, they need to remember that they are “young, gifted, and black,” uplifting their

spirits. This uplifting lyric contributes to the empowering theme of the song. Simone reflects on her childhood as a young, black girl and compares it to her life as an adult, singing “There are times when I look back, And I am haunted by my youth, Oh but my joy of today, Is that we can all be proud to say, To be young, gifted and black, Is where it's at.” This lyric displays how there were times in Simone’s life when she was made to feel ashamed of her black skin, haunting her. This admission emphasizes how important it is that black people feel proud of their skin color in the present, further highlighting the empowering nature of this song’s message. “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” is a political song because it empowers black people to be proud of their blackness in spite of the racist attacks directed towards them because of their skin color, making this song one of the most empowering anthems of the Civil Rights Movement.

The musical elements of “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” create a soulful, peaceful sound that builds up and becomes more powerful when accompanying the lyric “To be young, gifted, and black,” emphasizing the empowering idea that black people should love and be proud of their black skin. The dynamics of the song are almost cyclical. The song begins rather soft and light, but it builds up and gets louder when exclaiming the lyric “To be young, gifted, and black,” usually near the end of each verse. These louder dynamics serve to make that lyric memorable, reminding the listener of the song’s empowering message. The vocal performance of the song features prominent background vocals that are an important element in this song. The background vocalists are commonly heard when singing the phrase “To be young, gifted, and black.” With many vocalists singing this line, it sounds like a crowd of people is singing the lyric, giving it a more powerful sound that amplifies the empowering message of the song. The form of the song is unstructured, consisting only of different verses. With no choruses, the hook

“To be young, gifted, and black” gets repeated often throughout the song. This repetition reiterates the message of the song, inspiring black people to love their black skin. Lastly, the melody of the song is conjunct. All of the notes of the vocals and instruments have similar pitches, giving the song a harmonious sound. This unified sound serves to focus attention on the message of the song rather than distracting the listener from the message. The changing dynamic, use of background vocals, repetition of the lyric “To be young, gifted, and black,” and the conjunct melody create a soft, peaceful sound that becomes louder when singing “To be young, gifted, and black,” emphasizing the empowering message that urges black people to be proud of the fact that they are black, despite the racism that they face.

When I chose “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” to be in my curation, I was excited to work with a protest song by Nina Simone. I am a fan of hers, loving her songs “Feeling Good” and “I Put A Spell on You.” While I had heard of her more popular songs, I had never heard any of her protest songs before this class. I was very happy that I was able to hear “Mississippi Goddam” in class and “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” through this project. Nina Simone is a very powerful artist and one of the biggest musical icons of the Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, I loved the uplifting nature of the song. The empowering message is still very necessary today due to police brutality and our current political climate. I find it interesting how several anthems of the Civil Rights Movement have messages that still resonate today in the Black Lives Matter Movement. “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” is a powerful song emphasizing the idea of black pride, making it one of the most empowering anthems of the Civil Rights Movement.

Side B

Songs of the Black Lives Matter Movement



Track 7: “Black Rage” - Lauryn Hill (2014)

The first song on Side B of my concept album is “Black Rage” by Lauryn Hill. In this song, Hill creates an honest reflection of how it feels to be a black American in the 2010s, drawing from her feelings of fear, sadness, and anger. Hill describes a few of the many injustices black people have faced historically and still face today, singing “Black rage is founded on two-thirds a person, Rapings and beatings and suffering that worsens, Black human packages tied up in strings, Black rage can come from all these kinds of things.” In this lyric, Hill references the Three-Fifths Compromise in the Constitution that states that a slave’s vote would only be worth three-fifths of a vote, along with rapings, beatings, and lynchings. Hill lists these injustices as some of the many reasons she is angry with the way black people are treated in

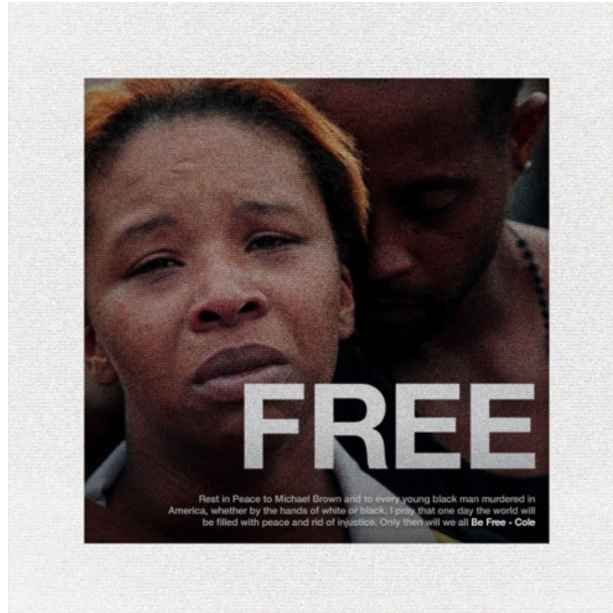
America, providing a perspective on how it feels to be black in America today. Hill demonstrates how thinking about these injustices turns her fear into anger in the chorus, singing “When the dogs bite, When the beatings, When I'm feeling sad, I simply remember all these kinds of things, and then I don't fear so bad!” This chorus displays that, when Hill thinks of racist acts such as police brutality, she doesn't fear for her safety anymore, rather, she just feels angry at the injustices she faces. Hill's lyrics reveal the perspective of a black woman thinking about all the racist acts that occur in America, providing an honest reflection of how it feels to be black in America. Hill illustrates a paradox black people encounter in America, in which black people face discrimination and injustice, yet are criticized when they complain about it. Hill sings “Black rage is founded on draining and draining, Threatening your freedom, To stop your complaining, Poisoning your water, While they say it's raining, Then call you mad for complaining, complaining.” Here, Hill references the crisis in Flint, Michigan, in which the predominantly black city's drinking water has been contaminated by lead for years with no solution to fix the problem. Essentially, these people can't drink or use running water in their homes, yet they are criticized when they complain or ask for solutions from the government. This reflects a larger problem in society, in which black people encounter racist acts or microaggressions, voice their frustration with these deeds, and are immediately labeled as angry or aggressive by people unwilling to hear why these deeds were wrong. This is a lose-lose situation for black people, as they are unfairly discriminated against, yet are criticized for trying to stop the discrimination. By calling out this paradox, Hill further reflects on how it feels to be black in America. “Black Rage” is a political song because it provides insight on the lives and

feelings of black people in America, making it one of the most honest anthems of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

The musical elements of “Black Rage” create a sad and angry sounding interpretation of the classic song “My Favorite Things,” ultimately highlighting the honest lyrics and making the song more memorable. The arrangement of the song is inspired by the “Sound of Music’s” song “My Favorite Things.” “My Favorite Things” is a happy and uplifting song, while “Black Rage” reflects anger, fear, and sadness. This drastic shift in mood makes this version all the more powerful, allowing the message of the song to shine. The rhythm of the song is a medium tempo, similar to the original version of “My Favorite Things.” However, this song has dark, despairing lyrical content compared to the joyous lyrics of the original. This stark contrast gives the song a haunting quality, making the song and its message unforgettable. The dynamics of the song are soft and low throughout. This soft dynamic creates a dreary, mournful sound that ultimately reflects the emotions found in the lyrics. Lastly, the song takes on a form of verse-chorus. The chorus of “When the dogs bite, When the beatings, When I'm feeling sad, I simply remember all these kinds of things, and then I don't fear so bad” is very honest and reflective. The chorus is the part where the song gets most revealing, as Hill describes the shift in her feelings from fear to anger. This message is included in the most catchy and memorable part of the song, allowing the honest lyrics to leave a lasting impact on the listener. The unique arrangement, haunting sound, soft, low dynamic, and reflective chorus of “Black Rage” creates a sad, dreary sound for the song, reflecting the sadness, fear, and anger found in the song’s lyrics.

When reflecting on “Black Rage,” I always think of how the song has the same melody as “My Favorite Things.” I think it was brilliant of Hill to do this, as “My Favorite Things” is a

beloved classic to so many people, meaning many people know its melody. This popular melody is already ingrained in the mind's of many music listeners, and when accompanied by such powerful lyrics, a very memorable piece of art is created. I think this is one of my favorite songs on my album just because of how creative the song is. I am a big Lauryn Hill fan, loving her songs like "Ex-Factor" and "Doo Wop (That Thing)," and to hear her create such an emotional song makes me respect her even more. "Black Rage" provides an honest perspective on how it feels to be black in America in the 2010s, making this one of the most powerful anthems of the Black Lives Matter Movement.



Track 8: “Be Free” - J. Cole (2014)

Track #8 in my concept album is “Be Free” by J. Cole. In this song, Cole raps about the pain he feels because of the black lives lost due to police brutality, calling for a world free of violence and injustice. In the song’s hook, Cole raps about how black people want to “be free,” rapping “All we wanna do is take the chains off, All we wanna do is break the chains off, All we wanna do is be free, All we wanna do is be free.” Here, Cole uses chains to represent all of the things that destroy black lives, like discrimination, racism, and violence. He raps about wanting black people to be freed from these life-altering beliefs and behaviors, allowing them to live safer, happier lives. By expressing this idea of wanting freedom from these injustices, Cole creates a vision of a safer and more equal world. Cole questions why he sees so many people who look like him getting killed, rapping “Can you tell me why, Every time I step outside I see my [people] die.” In this lyric, Cole expresses frustration at the fact that black men like him get senselessly murdered so often. By stating that every time he steps outside, he sees more black men die, Cole allows the listener to feel the pain he feels as a black man living in a society with

so much violence. By allowing the listener to feel this pain and anger, Cole emphasizes why our society must try to eradicate all of the violence and injustice in our world. In this song, Cole features the eyewitness account of Dorian Johnson, friend of Michael Brown, who witnessed Brown get murdered by a police officer. Johnson vividly describes the moment the officer fired his first shot at Brown, the young men's attempt to flee for safety, and the moment the officer fired many more shots, killing Brown. By including this account in the song, Cole provides just one of the many examples of the horrifying ways innocent black men have been killed by the police. This account makes the listener truly feel the pain black people encounter due to police brutality, further emphasizing the need for a world free of violence and racism. "Be Free" is a political song because it illustrates the disastrous impact that violence and racism can have on black lives and calls for a world free of injustice, making the song one of the most powerful anthems of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

The musical elements of "Be Free" create a very soft, emotional sound that serves to highlight the powerful message of the song. The instrumentation of the song features just Cole's vocals accompanied by a keyboard. The inclusion of just a keyboard gives the song a very simple and quiet sound. Such simple instrumentation allows for the lyrics to be the main focus of the song, emphasizing the song's message. Cole's vocals in the song are extremely raw and unedited. His voice is very vulnerable, as you can hear cracks and breaks in his voice. The rawness of Cole's vocals makes the song's sound deeply moving and emotional. This emotional sound makes the song extremely powerful, amplifying the message of the lyrics. The dynamic of the song is very soft. Though Cole's voice is powerful at certain points, it has a fragile, delicate sound that allows for the pain in his voice to be heard very clearly. This fragility makes the song

even more emotional, placing a focus on the lyrics. Lastly, the rhythm of the song is very slow-paced. This gives the song a ballad-like feel that allows the lyrics to shine rather than the beat. This slow tempo does not distract from the lyrics, rather, it makes the lyrics the focal point of the song. The simple instrumentation, raw vocals, soft dynamic, and slow rhythm of “Be Free” create a delicate and emotional sound that serves to emphasize the message of the song.

I was honestly stunned when I had first heard “Be Free.” I don’t listen to rap often, and I had never listened to a J. Cole song before, so I was blown away by the power of this song. The way Cole raps is extremely emotional and you can hear the pain in his voice as he sings about police brutality. The ballad-like nature of this song is unlike anything I have ever heard before, giving the song a sense of drama and dreariness that really highlights the song’s lyrics. This is one of my favorite songs on this concept album due to its immensely powerful yet simple nature. Additionally, I was very moved by the inclusion of Dorian Johnson’s eyewitness account. Hearing about the shooting of Michael Brown from someone who was involved in it is absolutely heartbreaking. The inclusion of the account adds a layer of depth and emotion to the song that makes the message of the song even more powerful. “Be Free” is a song with a very simple arrangement and incredibly emotional lyrics, making this one of the most powerful anthems of the Black Lives Matter Movement.



Track 9: “Glory” - Common & John Legend (2014)

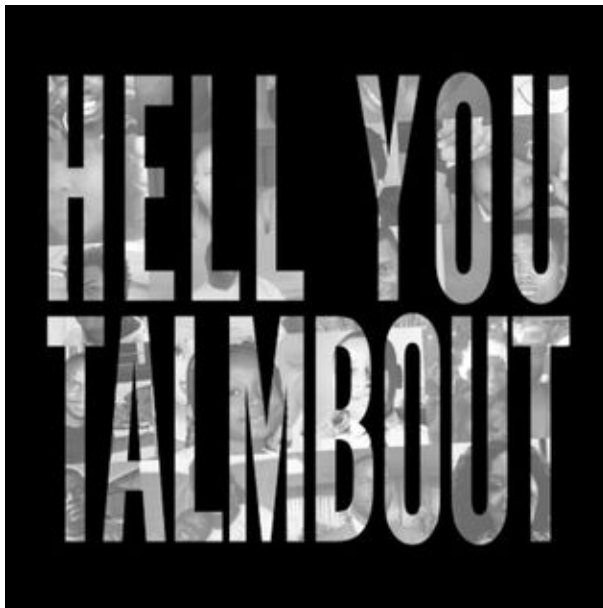
The next song in my curation is “Glory” by Common and John Legend. “Glory” seeks to uplift the spirits of black people living in a time with so much violence and police brutality, singing about a time when they will receive justice. In the chorus, Legend sings of a future in which discrimination ends, singing “One day when the glory comes, It will be ours, it will be ours, One day when the war is won, We will be sure, we will be sure.” Here, the war being won is the “war” that fights against racism and violence, while the coming glory represents equality. Legend sings of a day when discrimination is defeated and justice prevails, sending a hopeful message to black people who have faced discrimination that uplifts their spirits. Common sings about the resilience of black people in the verses, singing “When it go down we woman and man up, They say, "Stay down", and we stand up.” Here, Common sings that when black people are faced with discrimination and made to feel less than human, they rise up and fight against this hatred. This lyric speaks on how resilient black people are, despite all of the bigotry and violence

that has been directed towards them, uplifting their spirits. Legend empowers the listener to continue to fight for equality in the bridge, singing “Now the war is not over, victory isn't won, But we'll fight on to the finish, and when it's all done, We'll cry glory.” In this lyric, Legend reminds the listener that more work must be done to achieve true equality and justice. Dreaming of a time when this fight for equality is complete, Legend inspires black people to keep persisting in the fight for justice, in spite of all of the injustices they face. “Glory” is a political song because it encourages black people to keep dreaming of and fighting for a day when they are treated with equality, making the song one of the most inspirational anthems of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

The musical elements of “Glory” create an emotional and inspiring sound for the song, reflecting the uplifting message behind the lyrics. The instrumentation of the song features just violins and piano. These two instruments unite to create a dramatic and deeply emotional sound. This powerful sound serves to amplify the power of the lyrics, uplifting the listener. The vocal arrangement of the song features Legend singing and Common rapping, with a choir singing background vocals. This choir primarily sings the word “Glory,” giving the song a moving, gospel feel. The choir emphasizes the idea of a coming glory to the listener, ultimately highlighting the uplifting nature of the song. The harmony of the song is very consonant. The instrumentation and vocals of the song complement each other rather than clash with each other. This harmoniousness creates a beautiful sound that doesn't detract from the lyrics, rather, it helps emphasize the song's empowering message. Lastly, the song's form is essentially chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-verse-chorus-outro, with verses rapped by Common and the choruses and bridge sung by Legend. The chorus of this song contains the clearest reflection of

the song's message. The contrast between Common's rapping compared to Legend's powerful vocals allows for the chorus to shine even more, amplifying the message of the song. The emotional instrumentation, gospel choir, consonant harmony, and powerful chorus create a really beautiful and inspiring sound that reflects the empowering message of "Glory."

I was really moved by the inspirational message behind "Glory." The beautiful choir that cries out "glory" and Legend's powerful vocals combine to make this song extremely moving. The notion of true equality and justice being possible is very emotional and inspiring. This uplifting message makes the song feel all the more necessary. Additionally, I really loved Common's rapping in the song. Earlier in this project I stated how I don't listen to rap music often, so I am grateful to have been exposed to so many different and talented artists through this album. Common raps with a clarity and a power that adds a whole different level of emotion to the song. This song makes me really respect Common's talent both as a rapper and as a songwriter. "Glory" is an emotional song with an inspiring message, making it one of the most powerful anthems of the Black Lives Matter Movement.



Track 10: “Hell You Talmbout” - Janelle Monáe & Wondaland Records (2015)

Track #10 on my concept album is “Hell You Talmbout” by Janelle Monáe and the artists of Wondaland Records. In this song, the singers release their feelings of anguish over the deaths of many African-Americans due to police brutality and call out those who remain silent or indifferent when such violence occurs. The chorus of this song reflects the feelings of pain and anger felt due to the murders and wrongdoings committed by the police towards black people. In the song, the chorus consists of just the line “Hell you talmbout” repeated six times. “Talmbout” acts a contraction of the phrase “talking about,” so this lyric essentially means “what the hell are you talking about.” In the context of this song, this lyric illustrates the shock and outrage people feel when they hear about yet another case of police brutality, forcing them to question whether such tragedy can really be real. Feelings of disgust and anger felt due to racism and violence are released through this song, making this song an incredibly powerful anthem. The pre-chorus of this song calls on those who have ignored acts of police brutality and acted indifferent to say the names of those who have lost their lives due to such violence. The pre-chorus consists of just the

phrase “Say his/her name” repeated seven times, followed by the line “Won't you say his/her name?” This lyric challenges the listener to say the names of all the victims, forcing the listener to honor the dead and acknowledge the destruction police brutality causes in the lives of black people. By challenging those who disregard such violence to say the names of the victims, the singers hope to make these people care about ending police brutality. In the song, names of several black people who were murdered or wronged by the police are invoked. Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, and Amadou Diallo are just some of the names invoked in the song that were victims of violence committed by the police. By including these names in the song and telling the listener to say their names, the singers demand justice for these victims and illustrate the devastating effect police brutality has on so many different people. “Hell You Talmbout” is a political song because it allows the singers to release their feelings of pain and trauma caused by police brutality and calls on people to fight to end police brutality, making it a cathartic anthem of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

The musical elements of “Hell You Talmbout” create a loud, powerful sound that reflects the anger and pain felt in the lyrics, allowing the song to feel cathartic. The instrumentation of the song features only drums. The drums are played loudly, as if the drummers are releasing their anger by hitting the drums. This gives the song a booming and angry feel. The bombastic sound created by the drums reflects the anger felt by black people as a result of police brutality, allowing the song to act as a catharsis of their emotions. Regarding the vocal arrangement of the song, the singers don't so much as sing as they do shout loudly and angrily. These shouts come across as chants that make the song participatory. This participatory nature encourages the listener to say the names of the victims and honor them, accomplishing the goal of the song.

Lastly, the dynamic of the song is very loud. This loud dynamic created by the bombastic drums and the shouting vocals reflects the anguish felt by black people because of police brutality, further developing the song's cathartic nature. The booming instrumentation, chant-like shouts, and loud dynamic create an angry and powerful sound for "Hell You Talmbout," reflecting the feelings found in the lyrics and giving the song a cathartic nature.

I feel that "Hell You Talmbout" is very effective in making the listener care about fighting against police brutality. The song is essentially just a powerful rally cry, forcing the listener to think of all the black lives lost due to police brutality. After hearing these names, I looked up several of the victims listed in this song to find out what happened to them. I had heard of several of these cases on the news but many names also never got the national attention they deserved. Reading about each victim's death made me feel angry, but hearing about how so few of these victims ever got any justice angered me even more. So often juries side with the officers who killed these men and women, allowing murderers to walk free while innocent people die. This song is so important because it honors the victims and allows the listener to mourn and release a little anger, ultimately mobilizing people to fight for an end to police brutality. "Hell You Talmbout" is a cathartic song that reflects anger, pain, and anguish in its lyrics, making it one of the most fiery anthems of the Black Lives Matter Movement.



Track 11: “Freedom” - Beyoncé ft. Kendrick Lamar (2016)

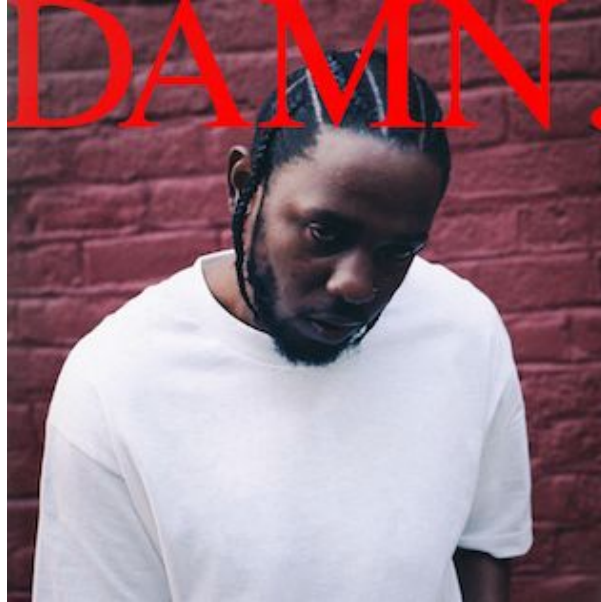
The next song in my curation is “Freedom” by Beyoncé featuring Kendrick Lamar. In this song, Beyoncé creates an anthem that uplifts black people, specifically black women, who have been disparaged historically due to discrimination and violence. In the song’s pre-chorus, Beyoncé sings about the resilience and strength of black women, singing “I’m telling these tears, “Go and fall away, fall away,” oh, May the last one burn into flames.” Here, Beyoncé sings about letting herself cry about the injustices and struggles she faces, so long as her tears end up starting a fire within her. Essentially, she gives herself the freedom to be emotional for a moment as long as she picks herself up and fights against these injustices after. This lyric displays the persistence Beyoncé, as a black woman, has, empowering her black women listeners to be vulnerable. The chorus of “Freedom” reflects how if black women aren’t given respect and equality, then they will empower and uplift themselves. Beyoncé sings “Freedom! Freedom! I can’t move, Freedom, cut me loose! Freedom! Freedom! Where are you? ‘Cause I need freedom, too! I break chains all by myself, Won’t let my freedom rot in hell, Hey! I’m a keep running, Cause a winner don’t quit

on themselves.” Here, Beyoncé sings about wanting freedom from racism but not getting it, and follows that by stating that she’ll get freedom on her own if she has to. This lyric reflects the power and determination black women can have when faced with discrimination, uplifting them. In the verses, Beyoncé compares herself and other black women to forces of nature, singing “I’m a wade, I’m a wave through the waters, Tell the tide, “Don’t move.”” Here, Beyoncé creates an image that shows how determined she is, saying that she will cross through water and control the tide. This lyric again depicts black women as powerful, allowing this song to be an empowering anthem for them. “Freedom” is a political song because it uplifts black women and calls them powerful and resilient, making this one of the most empowering songs of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

The musical elements of “Freedom” create a fun and powerful sound that can uplift the listener, reflecting the empowering message found in the song’s lyrics. The song’s instrumentation features organ, bass guitar, and some drums. These instruments are played loudly and dramatically, creating a powerful, thundering sound. The song’s rhythm has a very fast tempo, giving the song an upbeat nature. This upbeat nature makes the song feel fun and empowering. With the song feeling fun and empowering, the uplifting message of the song is emphasized. The song “Freedom” has a loud dynamic, created by Beyoncé’s powerful vocals mixing with the loud instrumentation. This loud dynamic makes the song powerful and motivational, ultimately allowing the song’s sound to reflect the same theme of empowerment as the lyrics. Lastly, the song has a spoken word element at the end of the song. Here, Beyoncé’s mother-in-law reflects on her life as a black woman. She describes facing different struggles yet always finding it within her to overcome them, stating that she “was served lemons,” but “made

lemonade.” This spoken word element gives the song elements of vulnerability and honesty that make the song that much more powerful. The thundering instrumentation, fast tempo, loud dynamic, and spoken word element create a powerful sound for “Freedom” that reflects the uplifting theme of the song.

Listening to “Freedom” reminds me just how amazing Beyoncé is. Beyoncé is an incredible performer and is one of my favorite singers. She has a powerful voice, can sing a wide range of genres, and has extremely uplifting songs. Also, she is one of the most political artists of our time. She always seeks to empower black peoples, especially black women, as proven in this song. She has grown from an R&B diva to a political icon. Beyoncé’s artistry is admirable and I love her! Additionally, “Freedom” is one of my favorite songs on Beyoncé’s album “Lemonade.” The song acts as a cathartic moment in the album. The album focuses on the love, anger, and frustration black women sometimes feel, and this song acts as the moment when these emotions are released, making the song a turning point in the album. “Freedom” is a powerful song with a message of empowerment for black women, making it an uplifting anthem for the Black Lives Matter Movement.



Track 12: “XXX.” - Kendrick Lamar ft. U2 (2017)

The final song in my concept album is “XXX.” by Kendrick Lamar featuring U2. “XXX.” seeks to call out the hypocrisy of America, arguing that the American ideals of “liberty and justice for all” aren’t always given to black people. The first line of the song demonstrates this hypocrisy, stating “America, God bless you if it's good to you.” This lyric implies that the idea of American being a free and wonderful land for all excludes many minorities. Essentially, the lyric states that America is good to you if you are a white male, exposing some of the hypocrisy in America. In the verses, Lamar calls out some racist U.S. politicians who label black people as dangerous yet support U.S. activity that puts the country at risk. Lamar raps “It's nasty when you set us up, Then roll the dice, then bet us up, You overnight the big rifles, then tell Fox to be scared of us, Gang members or terrorists, et cetera, et cetera, America's reflections of me, that's what a mirror does.” This lyric displays more hypocrisy in America, calling out the government for getting involved in dangerous wars and then demonizing black Americans at home. The chorus of this song, sung by U2, highlights the violence that occurs in America, countering the

idea that America is a safe country. U2 sings “It's not a place, This country is to me a sound, Of drum and bass.” Here, drum and bass act as a metaphor for the sound of gunfire that is heard all too often in this country. This lyric shows how America isn't the safe land people claim it to be if you live in communities ravaged by gun violence. “XXX.” is a political song because it shows that the freedom and justice offered in America aren't always offered to black citizens.

The musical elements of “XXX.” create an unique and captivating sound that highlights the bold message found in the song. The rhythm of the song is very quick paced. As a rapper, Lamar uses this fast pace to make his lyrics more impactful. The fast pace of the song makes the listener really focus on what Lamar is saying, allowing the listener to truly grasp at the song's message. The song features a sharp shift in musical style. In the first half of XXX., the song features an electronic hip-hop beat found in many current rap songs. In the latter half, the music sounds much more rock and jazz based. This stark difference in music makes the song sound intriguing, capturing the listener's attention and allowing them to hear the bold lyrics. Lastly, the song features a sample of “American Soul” by U2 which acts as the song's chorus, singing “It's not a place, This country is to me a sound, Of drum and bass.” This is a key lyric in the song, exposing the rampant violence found in America. Having a completely different artist and sound for this important section really highlights the message found in the lyrics. The fast rhythm, unique musical arrangement, and rock sampling create an intriguing sound for “XXX.” that draws the listener in, ultimately emphasizing the lyrics of the song.

To me, the most interesting aspect of “XXX.” is the song's lyrical content. As a songwriter, Lamar was able to write very powerful, poetic lyrics that cover multiple themes at once. Lamar begins by implying that even good people are capable of evils. In these lyrics,

Lamar describes what he would do if someone ever hurt his family, implying that he would kill the perpetrator. He uses the next verse to reference the hypocrisy found in America, rapping about the country's violent history and mistreatment of people of color. Lamar provides a thorough analysis of the hypocrisy in America in only about four minutes, making this song a powerful masterpiece. Additionally, I really enjoyed covering Lamar for this project. Like Beyoncé, Lamar is one of the most political and revolutionary artists of this generation. Many of Lamar's albums cover topics about gun control, racism, life in America, and other political topics. I admire Lamar's ability to create such songs with such powerful messages. "XXX." is an intriguing and powerful song with a deep political message that analyzes the difference in how America treats black people compared to white people, making this one of the most unique anthems written during the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Conclusion:

I had such a fun time working on this concept album! This project allowed me to learn so much about the history of both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement. I learned more about the history of lynching from “Strange Fruit,” about the Birmingham Church Bombing from “Alabama,” about the lives of several black men and women who have been victims of police brutality through “Hell You Talmbout,” and so much more. Working on this project broadened my knowledge of black history, a history that unfortunately is not always widely explored in many predominantly white schools in America. I am grateful that this project allowed me to expand my knowledge of American history.

This project allowed me to explore music in a deep way, encouraging me to listen to artists and genres that I don’t often listen to. I had always heard of artists like Billie Holiday, The Freedom Singers, and Bob Dylan, but I had never listened to them, so I’m happy this project exposed me to their work. Conversely, I love artists like Beyoncé, Lauryn Hill, and Nina Simone, so I had a great time analyzing their political work. J. Cole, Common, and Kendrick Lamar showed me how powerful rap music can be, and I look forward to listening to more of their music! My three favorite songs I discovered through this album are “Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday, “People Get Ready” by The Impressions, and “Be Free” by J. Cole, as they each resonate with me in a different way.

I learned so much about both the political and musical elements of all of these songs, teaching me how powerful protest music can be. I worked so hard on this curation, and I am really proud of how this project turned out. I had so much fun analyzing lyrics and working with different musical elements! Thank you to the Honors Program for allowing me to work on this

project and to my professors Dr. Anne Flaherty and Dr. Laura Pruett for creating this concept album with me!!! :)

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